

# Kew Wildlife Zone: Attitudes and behavior in wildlife habitats

Studying habitats and the creatures in them offers an opportunity for children to explore their attitudes and fears, and to analyse the effects their behaviour has in a wider context, particularly on other living organisms. The process encourages everyone to develop a sense of care and responsibility towards wildlife and habitats.

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# 6.0

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## Attitudes and values

Children may already have strong attitudes to wildlife and wild places. These may be negative as well as positive. Explore these with your class, ideally before you begin work outdoors, or at the very start of your outdoor session, so you have the opportunity to detect and analyse those that arise.

### Negative attitudes

### Positive analysis/explanations

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Natural places are full of germs

There are germs (bacteria and viruses) everywhere. Most are harmless and some even help us. There are more germs harmful to people in places where there are already lots of people. However, wild animals can carry harmful germs too, and leave them behind in their footprints and faeces (poo). When we are working with soil, plants or pond and river water, we should be careful not to put our hands in or near our mouth, always wash hands afterwards, and before eating food, and cover any cuts or grazes.

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Wild places are 'dangerous'

There are bad people, and they can hang out in wild places, as well as in built-up places. However, wild places are as safe as anywhere else as long as we are sensible and apply normal rules (always tell an adult where you are going, don't visit isolated places on your own, listen to other people's views on whether a place is safe as well as making your own judgements etc).

Wild places offer hazards that may be unfamiliar. Water can be dangerous if we fall in. It may be difficult to judge how deep the water is, or where the water begins if there are water plants or floating leaves on the surface. It is safer to explore watery habitats from a firm edge or specially built platform.

If you are designing your own wildlife habitat, discuss with the children aspects that will make it safer, e.g. a visible area will deter vandals.

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Wild creatures bite and sting

A few creatures will hurt us by accident or if they think we are trying to hurt them. Many creatures can give a sharp nip, bees and wasps can sting, and some caterpillars have hairs that may give us a rash. However, minibeasts like snails, British spiders and earwigs are harmless. All the same, we should try not to touch them because this may hurt *them*.

Larger creatures, like foxes or snakes are usually very shy and you will be lucky to even see one. They will only ever hurt us if they are trapped or very frightened. The only poisonous snake in Britain is the adder. This snake could bite, but only if it is stepped on or is very frightened. If we move quietly and carefully, we will avoid scaring these creatures.

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## Negative attitudes

## Positive analysis/explanations

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Plants are dangerous or poisonous

A few plants are poisonous, and a few can sting or give us a rash. We need to learn which ones to avoid (e.g. nettles, giant hogweed). Most plants are perfectly safe. However, we should never eat anything (plant or otherwise) unless we know what it is, and that it is safe and clean. Children can be encouraged to collect and eat a few blackberries (if properly identified, washed clean of any bird muck or pollution, and not from close to a busy road). This reinforces the link between food and growing plants. However, in wild places there are lots of birds and other creatures that need berries for food more than we do.

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Animals only live on farms or in zoos

There are lots of animals in all wild and not-so-wild places, but some of them are harder to see than monkeys and cows! Wild animals in Britain are very shy, so we probably won't see any, or very many mammals or reptiles. We have to be detectives to work out what creatures are around. Birds are the easiest to spot. Mammals like foxes and hedgehogs sometimes leave signs that they have visited. The easiest animals to watch and study are minibeasts.

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Minibeasts are too small and difficult to see

To address the size issue, encourage children to explore minibeast habitats (e.g. grassland) by getting close to it – lying on the ground if necessary, and looking closely at the creatures they discover. Hand lenses might be helpful. Use close-up photographs of mini-beasts. Some of them are very beautiful, others are bizarre.

Imagine what the habitat would be like for us if we were shrunk to the size of a snail. This could be the basis for a story.

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Minibeasts are boring

Ask groups of children to make lists of animals they think are interesting, then to discuss why they like those animals (e.g. 'tigers are cool because they hunt other animals'). Then ask them to think of some minibeasts, and some of the amazing things that they can do, e.g. spiders can spin webs to catch their prey, snails can live for weeks without food or water sealed inside their shells, fleas can jump over 100 times their own height. Use the opportunity to research 'fascinating facts' about minibeasts.

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## Positive attitudes and values to explore and encourage

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Wild places are important for people

Plants, and especially trees, help to clean the air that we breathe. They add oxygen and help to remove some types of pollution.

People like to have green places to relax in too.

Encourage your class to think of ways that wild and green places are important for people.

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Wild places are important for plants and animals

Most creatures need special places to live (called habitats). Different creatures have different needs in terms of shelter, food, and space. The more different types of wild places we have, the more different types of plants and animals we will also have. This variety of plants and animals is called 'biodiversity'.

By exploring different habitats we can discover some of the things that make wild places good for the creatures that live there.

We need to be very careful when studying animals, so that we don't harm them. All animals, from minibeasts to mammals, have special needs. We may not always know exactly what those needs are, so by touching animals, keeping them in containers or in the classroom, we may be harming them without even realising it.

When children find animals, encourage them to think about their needs – they can get clues from the habitats they were found in. E.g. some creatures need to be underwater, damp, in the dark, or with others of the same kind.

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All creatures depend on other plants and animals

Plants are food for herbivores, herbivores are food for carnivores. Decomposers turn dead plants and animals back into nutrients that plants can use. There are other ways that animals and plants depend on each other too. Plants use insects for pollination and dispersal (spreading their seeds), for example. Because all creatures depend on each other, if one type of plant or animal disappears, it has an effect on everything else.

You can explore this in: Food chains, Pollination.

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Wild places offer inspiration

Wild places, plants and creatures can be great source of inspiration for stories, art, and other creative work. We can find inspiration by looking, listening, touching, and smelling.

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## Behaviour

When studying habitats and the wildlife in them children (and adults!) should be encouraged to consider and discuss appropriate ways of behaving. Drawing up a Code of Conduct is a useful class exercise before undertaking an activity. You may want to devise Codes of Conduct for a variety of situations and locations (e.g. visit to a nature reserve, studying minibeasts, working in your school's wildlife area).

You may want to explore the effect of different types of behaviour through role-play or theatre (see Chapter 4 - Environmental Games), as a way to develop Codes of Conduct.

## Codes of Conduct - areas to think about

### Respecting habitats as animals' homes

Habitats are homes to lots of different types of plants and animals. Some of them may be very sensitive to noise, disturbance or damage. Think about creatures that might be scared by movement or loud noise, and plants and creatures that might be harmed by trampling and moving stones or logs.

### Studying animals

The RSPCA advises that no creatures, even mini-beasts, should be handled. Look at them in their natural habitat, for example, on a twig or a leaf and always put them straight back where they came from. Think of ways to study them without touching them. Drawing them, using photographs and video footage all work well. If you do decide to collect insects, you can consult 'codes of conduct' from groups such as the Royal Entomological Society ([www.buglife.org.uk](http://www.buglife.org.uk)).

### Litter

Litter can be harmful for wildlife. It can smother plants, trap small animals, and harm larger animals that eat it or step on it. Discuss attitudes to litter and devise appropriate solutions (the organisation ENCAMS ([www.encams.org](http://www.encams.org)) can provide lots of educational materials and ideas).

### Staying safe

Consider the locations where you will be studying Habitats and Wildlife. What are the hazards and how can the risks be minimised (see Chapter 7).

### Who else to involve

If you are exploring wild habitats outside the school grounds, you need the landowner's permission before visiting, unless the area is obviously public access. This is particularly important on farmland. Landowners and other local people may be very interested in what you are doing, and able to help. Genuine community involvement is mutually beneficial, especially in a large habitat project.

### Laws

There are laws relating to Habitats and Wildlife that teachers and children should be aware of.

- It is illegal to dig up any wild plant without the landowner's permission
- It is illegal to disturb nesting birds
- Habitats that bats live in are specially protected
- Badger setts (the holes they live in) must not be disturbed
- You can find further information on wildlife law from English Nature ([www.english-nature.org.uk](http://www.english-nature.org.uk)).

### **RSPCA's Code of conduct:**

In the Wildlife Garden we:

- always show respect for animals and their habitats
- do not touch or pick up any wild animals – however small they are
- look at minibeasts on a twig or a leaf and always put them straight back where they came from
- never drop litter as this can harm animals
- learn all we can about the animals we see
- move slowly and quietly and keep to the path
- try not to disturb animals or damage their homes
- turn over stones, logs or plants very gently and replace them carefully
- never touch or remove birds' eggs or nests
- leave fledgling birds alone so their parents can return to them
- think about animal welfare
- make sure we don't hurt ourselves

Source: RSPCA Education 'Animal-friendly Schools' leaflet.

Compiled with reference to the RSPCA's Focus On Minibeasts guide and 'Animal-friendly Schools' leaflet.  
(See [www.rspca.org](http://www.rspca.org))